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ABSTRACT

The history of Black professional football is obscure, although it is known that in the early years Black and White athletes played together on basis of ability. Several Black Americans were members of early professional football teams; however, in the late 1920s, they seemed to disappear from team rosters. Each of the eighteen Black professional football players that played between 1900-1946 are identified by team, and a brief biographical sketch is presented. (CJ)

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# A HISTORY OF BLACK PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL PLAYERS FROM 1900-1946

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In the early history of professional football, black and white athletes played together on the basis of ability, and several Black Americans were members of early professional teams. However, in the late 1920s, black athletes seemed to disappear from team rosters. Eighteen players have been identified and considered to be the black professional football players from 1900-1946. Charles Follis is considered to have been the first in 1902; Joe Lillard and Raymond Kemp were the last in 1933 until the 1946 season when Marion Motley and Bill Willis played with the Cleveland Browns of the AAFC and Ken Washington and Woody Strode joined the Los Angeles Rams of the NFL.[1]

This paper examines the participation of black professional football players from 1900-1946. The main objective is to identify the players and their teams. A brief biographical sketch of each player will be outlined.

The history of black professional football, unlike that of baseball, is obscure. The evidence indicates that a black league, as in baseball, did not exist for various reasons: the economics of the times, the lack of fan support, the cost

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of the team's maintenance, the lack of sufficient numbers of black players for a league organization, and the disrepute of early professional football.[2] Because of the game's problems, many of the college-educated blacks shunned professional football preferring to pursue other professional goals.[3]

Professional football, in its early years, did not receive the attention given to other sports such as professional baseball, boxing, and collegiate football. Contrasted with professional baseball, professional football had not gained acceptance. League organization was loose, ineffective, or did not exist prior to 1920 when the American Professional Football Association was formed.[4] Teams were formed and disbanded because of lack of fan attendance and of ownership finances. Players jumped teams, played under assumed names, and received meager salaries. The game was considered violent; the playing conditions dangerous. Yet, as in today's game, most players came from the collegiate ranks.

Charles Follis is considered to be the first black professional football player. He was a 1902 and 1903 teammate of Branch Rickey on the Shelby (Ohio) Athletic Club team. The Shelby A. C., billed as an "amateur" team at the time, became a professional team in 1906 known as the Shelby Blues. He signed with Frank Schiffer, the team's manager, in 1904. The

6' 3" and 200 lb. back played for Wooster High School in 1899 and became its first team captain in 1900. In a game against the 1901 Shelby team, Charles impressed Frank Schiffer who signed him for the 1902 season. When Shelby became a professional team in 1904, the team announced in the Shelby Globe that it had signed Charles for the season.[5]

The "Black Cyclone" played until 1906 when an injury ended his football career. He also played three years of professional baseball with the Cuban Giants. He died in 1910 at 31 years of age after being rushed to a Cleveland hospital following a baseball game.[6]

Charles "Doc" Baker (B) played with the Akron Indians in 1906-08. He was relatively unknown in the Akron area. He was considered to be a great football player. His story is still a mystery. It remains to be told.[7]

Henry McDonald (HB) joined the Oxford (New York) Pros in 1911. In 1912, he switched to the Rochester Jeffersons. He played with the Jeffersons until 1920 when he turned up on the All-Buffaloes roster. During his career, he played several games against Jim Thorpe's team. In a 1971 interview, Henry indicated that his usual salary was $25 per game.[8]

In 1915, Gideon E. "Charlie" Smith (T) played for the Canton Bulldogs. He was a 1910 graduate of Hampton Institute

who later attended and played for the Michigan Agriculture College (Michigan State) in 1916. Gideon later returned to his alma mater, Hampton Institute, as a professor of physical education.

Robert W. "Bobby" Marshall (E) is mentioned as a 1905 and 1906 Walter Camp All-American from the University of Minnesota. He is reported to have played semi-pro football with various teams and is listed as a member of the 1919 Rock Island Independents. His playing days continued until the age of 47. The Cleveland Panthers (1920), Minnesota Marines (1922, 1924), and Duluth Eskimoes (1923, 1925) were teams on which he played.

Frederick Douglas "Fritz" Pollard, a 1916 Walter Camp All-American selection from Brown University, played in 1919 with the Akron Indians. The Indians became the Pros in 1920 and Fritz remained until 1921. In 1922, the Milwaukee Badgers included Fritz Pollard, Paul Robeson, and Duke Slater on its roster. Pollard is considered to be the first black professional football coach. He coached and played with the Hammond Pros from 1923-1925.[9]

Paul Robeson, the Rutgers Phi Beta Kappan and All-American end in 1917 and 1918, is listed on the 1920 Hammond Pros. He played with the Akron Pros in 1920-21 and the Milwaukee Badgers

in 1922. The opportunity for practicing law in Harlem seemed to take preference over his professional football endeavors. Paul did not play in 1923.[10]

Jaye Mayo "Inky" Williams (E) attended Howard University where he was called "Ziggy;" later he played at Brown University with the nickname of "Inky." In 1921, Jaye is listed as playing with the Canton Bulldogs and the Hammond Pros. He stayed with the Pros until 1926; however, he also included stints with the Dayton Triangles in 1924 and the Cleveland Bulldogs in 1925.[11]

In 1922, John Shelburne played fullback for the Hammond Pros, but stayed for only one season. He voluntarily ended his career to enter teaching. Fred "Duke" Slater, a 1921 All-American from Iowa, started his professional career in the same year with the Rock Island Independents. He is also listed on the 1922 Milwaukee Badgers as a teammate of Pollard and Robeson. Duke Slater ended his playing days with the Chicago Cardinals (1926-1931). The 6' 4" tackle disdained the use of the then optional helmet. He attended law school between seasons, practiced law in Chicago, and later became a judge in 1948 in Chicago's municipal court.

James Turner of the 1923 Milwaukee Badgers, Edward "Sol" Butler of the 1923 Rock Island Independents (also the Hammond Pros), Dick Hudson of the 1923 Minnesota Marines, and Charles

West of the 1924 Akron Pros, were the other black professionals of the early 1920s. The four men were backs: James from Northwestern, "Sol" from Dubuque, Dick from Creighton, and Charles from Washington and Jefferson.

There were few blacks on the NFL rosters in the late 1920s. In 1927, only two other blacks were playing: Marshall at age 47 with the Duluth Eskimoes and Slater at 28 with the Chicago Cardinals. Hugh Bradley (G) played on the 1928 Chicago Cardinals.

According to Ocania Chalk, the disappearance of blacks was partly attributed to the sagging economy in 1928-29 after the World War I boom. The league began tightening its belt and its liberality, perhaps.[12] Black players disappeared except for David Myers (G) of the Staten Island Stapletons in 1930, Joe Lillard (B) of the Chicago Cardinals in 1932-33, and Raymond Kemp (T) of the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1933.

Raymond Kemp joined the J. P. Rooney's 1932 semi-pro team which became the Pittsburgh Pirates of the NFL for the 1933 season. The Pirates later became the Steelers. In a videotaped interview at the Professional Football Hall of Fame, Raymond stated that he played for $65 per game salary. He did not play in 1934. Subsequently he became athletic director and football coach at Bluefield State, and athletic director and track coach at Tennessee State.[13]

Joe Lillard played with the Chicago Cardinals in 1932 and 1933. The 6' 2" 195-lb. quarterback was a triple-threat star; he also was an all-around athlete having played professional football, basketball, and baseball. His playing days and that of black professional football players of the NFL ended after the 1933 season. There were no blacks on NFL rosters until 1946 when Ken Washington and Woody Strode played for the Los Angeles Rams of the NFL and Bill Willis and Marion Motley for the Cleveland Browns of the AAFC.[14] Joe Lillard, however, continued playing for various all-star teams as many other black football players did until 1946. He played on a 1925 all-star team which lost to the New York Yankees by a 24-20 score on November 30, 1941.[15]

There were eighteen black professional football players from 1900-1946. With the appearance of Washington, Strode, Willis, and Motley in 1946, the doors became open. The black professional football players re-emerged.

CHRONOLOGICAL LISTING OF BLACK PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL PLAYERS

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1904 | Charles Follis | Shelby Blues | HB | also pro baseball player |
| 1906 | Charles "Doc" Baker | Akron Indians | RB | 1906-1908 |
| 1911 | Henry McDonald | Oxford Pros (New York)<br>1912 Rochester Jeffersons | HB | |
| 1915 | Gideon E. "Charlie" Smith | Canton Bulldogs | T | Hampton Institute (1910)<br>Michigan Agricultural College (Michigan State) 1916 |
| 1917 | Robert W. "Bobby" Marshall<br><br>(Walter Camp All-American 1905 and 1906) | Rock Island (1919)<br>Cleveland Panthers (1920)<br>Minneapolis (1922, 1924)<br>Duluth (1923, 1925) | E | Minnesota (1906)<br>Played to age 47 |
| 1919 | Fritz Pollard<br>(Walter Camp All-American 1916)<br><br><u>Also Player-Coach</u> | Akron Indians (1919)<br>Akron Pros, 1920-1921, 1925-1926, Milwaukee Badgers (1922), Hammond Pros (1923-1925), Providence (1925)<br>Hammond Pros, 1923, 1924 1925 | B | Brown |
| 1920 | Paul Robeson<br>(Walter Camp All-American 1917, 1918) | Hammond Pros (1920)<br>Akron Pros (1920-1921)<br>Milwaukee (1922) | E | Rutgers (1918)<br>Played with Pollard and Slater at Milwaukee |
| 1921 | Jaye Mayo "Inky" Williams | Canton Bulldogs (1921)<br>Hammond Pros (1921-1926)<br>Dayton (1924)<br>Cleveland Bulldogs (1925) | E | Howard University<br>Brown University |

CHRONOLOGICAL LISTING OF BLACK PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL PLAYERS [cont'd]

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1922 | John Shelburne | Hammond Pros (1922) | B | Dartmouth |
| 1922 | Fred "Duke" Slater (1921 All-American 2nd Team) | Milwaukee (1922) Rock Island (1922-25, 26) Chicago Cardinals (1926-31) | T | Iowa |
| 1923 | James Turner | Milwaukee (1923) | B | Northwestern |
| 1923 | Edward "Sol" Butler | Rock Island (1923) Hammond Pros (1923, 1924, 1926), Akron (1924), Canton Bulldogs (1926) | B | Dubuque |
| 1923 | Dick Hudson | Minnesota Marines (1923) Hammond (1925-26) | B | Creighton |
| 1924 | Charles West | Akron Pros (1924) | B | Washington and Jefferson |
| 1928 | Hugh W. Bradley | Chicago Cardinals (1928) | G | University of Iowa |
| 1930 | David Myers | Staten Island Stapletons (1930) | G | New York University |
| 1932 | Joe Lillard | Chicago Cardinals (1932-33) Played with various all-star teams. Also played pro basketball and baseball | B | University of Oregon (Chalk), Oregon State (Roberts) |
| 1933 | Raymond Kemp | Pittsburgh Pirates (1933) Became Steelers | T | Duquesne |

CHRONOLOGICAL LISTING OF BLACK PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL PLAYERS [cont'd]

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1946 | Ken Washington | Los Angeles Rams, NFL 3/21/46 | HB | UCLA |
| 1946 | Woody Strode | Los Angeles Rams, NFL 5/7/46 | E | UCLA |
| 1946 | Bill Willis | Cleveland Browns, AAFC 8/6/46 | G | Ohio State |
| 1946 | Marion Motley | Cleveland Browns, AAFC 8/9/46 | FB | Nevada |

FOOTNOTES

[1]Official records of the Professional Football Hall of Fame, Canton, Ohio. The information for this paper was obtained from the official records of the Hall of Fame including official programs of the teams, rosters, line-ups, newspaper reports, and pictures. The original listing of black professional football players was compiled by Milton Roberts and Joe Horrigan. Each player has been verified by official records. The listing was obtained on March 25, 1980. It is recognized as the most complete record of black professionals. Milton Roberts is a historian of football, and Joe Horrigan is the historian of the Professional Football Hall of Fame.

[2]This statement is based on information obtained from researching the early history of blacks in professional football. Ocania Chalk, Pioneers of Black Sport (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1975; Edwin B. Henderson and the Editors of Sport Magazine, International Library of Negro Life and History: The Black Athlete Emergence and Arrival (New York: Publishers Company, Inc., 1968); Edwin B. Henderson, The Negro in Sports (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1949); and other histories of Professional Football. The information is verified in a Hall of Fame videotaped interview of Raymond Kemp (a black professional football player in 1932-33 and a retired college professor/coach).

[3]The statement was corroborated by Thomas Verdell, a black All-American who played at Northwestern in 1926-28, in a telephone interview on May 14, 1980. Upon graduation, he elected to teach and coach at Howard University rather than attempt a career in professional football. The statement of Raymond Kemp in the previously-cited videotaped interview also supports the statement.

[4]American Professional Football Association, League Minutes, September 17, 1920; Ocania Chalk, Pioneers of Black Sport, p. 216.

[5]Milton R. Roberts and John Seaburn with Dean Charles, Buffalo Bills vs. New York Jets Official Program, The First Black Pro (September 21, 1975), p. 3D. Pictures of Charles Follis, individually and team as a member of the Shelby Blues, are on file in the Hall of Fame archives.

[6]Ibid., 6D.

[7]Ibid., 3D. The information on "Doc" Baker was obtained from the Roberts article as cited and verified in a telephone conversation with Milton Roberts on May 20, 1980. Baker's name does not appear in Chalk's work or in any other history of professional football. Roberts claims that the Baker story has been researched and will be published soon.

[8]Chalk, p. 212.

[9]Official rosters and game line-ups from Hall of Fame records.

[10]Chalk, p. 222; Roberts, telephone interview. The two sources state different reasons for Paul Robeson's departure from professional football in 1923. The former states that it was to pursue a theatrical career; the latter that it was to pursue a legal career.

[11]Official rosters; Chalk, p. 219; Roberts and Horrigan, unpublished listing.

[12]Chalk, pp. 223-224.

[13]Kemp, videotaped interview.

[14]Official Hall of Fame records verify the statement. Chalk's account, the unpublished listing, and a Marion Motley videotaped interview from the Hall of Fame Archives also support the statement.

[15]The New York Times, December 1, 1941 (game article and line-ups; The New York Times, November 30, 1941 (pre-game story).